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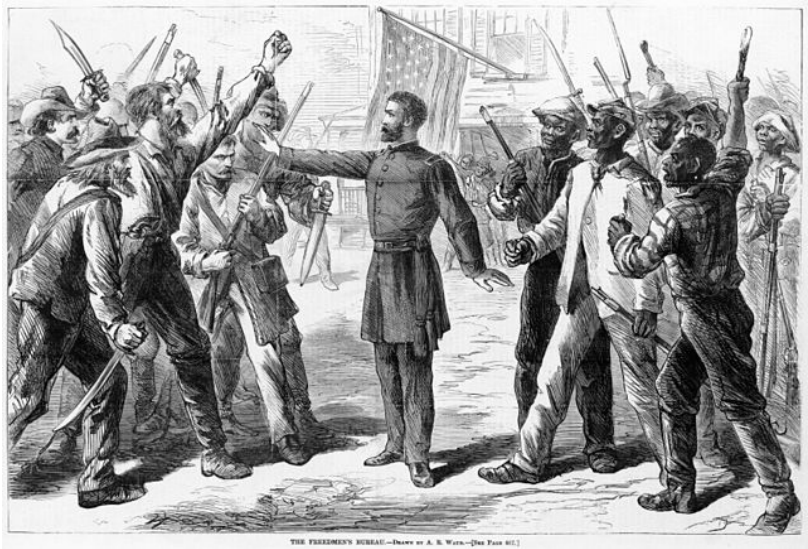


The Freedmen's Bureau: Work After Emancipation

Tweet

by *Jacqueline Jones*

In March 1865, the U. S. Congress created the **Freedmen's Bureau for Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands** to ease the transition between slavery and freedom for 3.5 million newly liberated slaves. The bureau had three main functions—to distribute rations to Southerners who had been loyal to the Union during the Civil War, to establish public schools for black children and adults, and to oversee labor contracts between landowners and black workers.



Alfred R. Waud, "The Freedmen's Bureau," Harper's Weekly (July 25, 1868)

Federal officials put great faith in annual labor contracts as a means to resume cotton staple-crop production in the South; get black workers back into the fields; and protect freed men, women and children from abusive employers. Typically, a worker would sign an agreement with an employer on January 1, and promise to work for the full calendar year. On December 31, the landowner would "reckon"—that is, tally up the amount of money the worker owed the employer for credits and supplies advanced to him during the year, the amount of cotton the worker and his family had produced, and the amount of money owed the worker from his share (usually one-third) of the crop. Northern whites in

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general assumed that these contracts would encourage white planters, many of whom had been slave owners, to treat their workers fairly and to refrain from coercive practices such as whippings and beatings that had been a hallmark of the institution of bondage. However, the bureau was chronically understaffed, and enforcement of labor contracts was difficult, since most bureau agents were stationed in towns, far away from isolated plantations.

The two documents below illustrate some of the limits and unanticipated consequences of these labor contracts. In the first, a letter to a Freedmen's Bureau official, a Georgia planter named M. C. Fulton complains that the black women on his plantation are staying at home and not working in the fields as they had under slavery. He writes, "Now these women have always been used to working out & it would be far better for them to go to work for reasonable wages & their rations—both in regard to health & in furtherance of their family wellbeing." This planter, like many others in the postbellum South, feared that the large-scale withdrawal of black women from the cotton fields would hinder the South's ability to achieve pre-war cotton production levels.

As you read the document, note Fulton's argument that these women "are as nearly idle as it is possible for them to be." What are they doing? Are they in fact "idle"? According to Fulton, what is the danger of having these wives dependent upon their husbands for support? Can you think of reasons why these women would not want to work in the fields, and why their husbands would support them in this decision? How does Fulton seek to ingratiate himself with General Tillson? Does Fulton's argue that only *black* women should have to work in the fields? Note his last sentence: What is he saying about class relations in the South?

The second document is a labor contract for employees on the South Carolina plantation of John D. Williams. Williams goes over the detailed terms of the agreement, at the outset stating his responsibilities, and then launching into a long list of behaviors he deems unacceptable among his workers. He notes that if any worker violates the terms of the agreement, he (Williams) reserves the right to fire that worker and deprive him of his share of the crop. In most cases a fired worker also lost his home, since most sharecroppers lived on the plantations where they worked. Williams probably assembled his workers together this day (Jan. 1, 1868), and read the contract to them, since a note at the bottom reveals that all of the black "signers" were illiterate. The last part of the contract indicates that black people were not the only southern workers to become caught up in the cycle of debt and dependency that flowed from the sharecropping system. A group of white men also signed this contract; their names are listed separately at the bottom of the document.

What are the stipulations governing the responsibilities and behavior of Williams's sharecroppers, as outlined in this contract? In what ways are these rules broadly—and vaguely—defined? What power did Williams retain over his workers? What was *their* recourse, if he treated them badly or failed to live up to his contractual obligations? What is the significance of the fact that seven whites also signed this contract? Although black families were trapped in the sharecropping system in disproportionately large numbers, many white families too became landless after the war, and they too worked as sharecroppers. In fact, by 1930, southern white sharecropping households outnumbered their black counterparts.

These two documents suggest that the federal officials who conceived postwar labor contracts for the freedpeople were either naïve or overly optimistic about the role of the contract as a means to protect the economic interests of the former slaves. The annual contract was not really appropriate for the cultivation of a crop that consumed only a part of the year—April to November—leaving the rest of the year a source



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of conflict between worker and employer. Black fathers and sons often left the plantation in the winter or early spring to seek wage-work elsewhere, while employers wanted them to remain and work on fences or perform other "off-season" tasks. Many landlords engaged in abusive or fraudulent conduct toward their employees, making it difficult for black families to leave one place and find a better place down the road. And finally, very few sharecroppers were able to purchase even small parcels of land; most received no cash wages for their year's labor, and many whites refused to sell land to blacks at any price.

DOCUMENTS:

Snow Hill near Thomson Georgia April 17th 1866
Dear Sir— Allow me to call your attention to the fact that most of the Freedwomen who have husbands are not at work—never having made any contract at all— Their husbands are at work, while they are as nearly idle as it is possible for them to be, pretending to spin—knit or something that really amounts to nothing for their husbands have to buy them clothing I find from my own hands wishing to buy of me—

Now these women have always been used to working out & it would be far better for them to go to work for reasonable wages & their rations—both in regard to health & and in furtherance of their family wellbeing— Say their husbands get 10 to 12— or 13\$ per month and out of that feed their wives and from 1 to 3 or 4 children—& clothe the family— It is impossible for one man to do this & maintain his wife in idleness without stealing more or less of their support, whereas if their wives (where they are able) were at work for rations & fair wages—which they can all get; the family could live in some comfort & more happily— besides their labor is a very important percent of the entire labor of the South— & if not made available, must effect to some extent the present crop— Now is a very important time in the crop—& the weather being good & to continue so for the remainder of the year, I think it would be a good thing to put the women to work and all that is necessary to do this in most cases is an order from you directing the agents to require the women to make contracts for the balance of the year— I have several that are working well—while others and generally younger ones who have husbands & from 1 to 3 or 4 children are idle—indeed refuse to work & say their husbands must support them. Now & then there is a woman who is not able to work in the field—or who has 3 or 4 children at work & can afford to live on her childrens labor—with that of her husband— Even in such a case it would be better she should be at work— Generally however most of them should be in the field— Could not this matter be referred to your agents. They are generally very clever men and would do right I would suggest that you give this matter your favorable consideration & if you can do so to use your influence to make these idle women go to work. You

would do them & the country a service besides gaining favor & the good opinion of the people generally

I beg you will not consider this matter lightly for it is a very great evil & one that the Bureau ought to correct—if they wish the Freedmen & women to do well— I have 4 or 5 good women hands now idle that ought to be at work because their families cannot really be supported honestly without it This should not be so—& you will readily see how important it is to change it at once— I am very respectfully Your obt servant

M. C. Fulton

I am very willing to carry my idle women to the Bureau agency & give them such wages as the Agent may think fair—& I will further guaranty that they shall be treated kindly & not over worked— I find a general complaint on this subject every where I go—and I have seen it myself and experienced its bad effects among my own hands— These idle women are bad examples to those at work & they are often mischief makers— having no employment their brain becomes more or less the Devil's work shop as is always the case with idle people—black or white & quarrels & Musses among the colored people generally can be traced to these idle folks that are neither serving God—Man or their country—

Are they not in some sort vagrants as they are living without employment—and mainly without any visible means of support—and if so are they not amenable to vagrant act—? They certainly should be— I may be in error in this matter but I have no patience with idleness or idlers Such people are generally a nuisance—& ought to be reformed if possible or forced to work for a support (and such too have [our?] business)— Poor white women have to work— so should all poor people—or else stealing must be legalized—or tolerated for it is the twin sister of idleness—

M. C. Fulton to Brig. Genl. Davis Tilson, 17 Apr 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, sec. 632, GA Assistant Commissioner, RG 105.

South Carolina
Laurens Dist. Jany. 1st. 1868 Know all men by these presents that I—John
D. Williams of the Dist and State aforesaid have agreed to give to the following negroes
on my White Plains plantation in said Dist one third of all the corn, sweet potatoes, wheat

& Cotton or oats & Malassus the said negroes do rais on Said plantation I am to furnish
as much mule or horse power & provision for the Mules & horses as may be necessary to
Cultivate the lands they plant. the negroes are to Cloth & feed themselves & pay all other
necessary expenses they need—medical bills & and I am to let them have corn—bacon—
at the current prices for such articles—the negroes hereby consenting and binding them-
selves to abide and settle by the accounts kept against them by myself or by my Agent
for articles supplide and furnished them and tha binds them Selves to be steady & atten-
tive to there work at all times and to work at keeping in repair all the fences on Said
plantation and assist in cuting & taking care of—all the grain crops on Said plantation
and work by the direction of me or my Agent—at all times to command there Services
untill Jan 1st 1869—

They are to be careful of all animals or emplements used by them shall protect the same
from enjry from other pearsons & shall be answerable for all propity lost—distroyed or
enjured by their negligence dishonesty or bad faith and should any of them depart from
the farm or from any services at any time with out our approval they shall forfeit one dol-
lar per day, for the first time and for the second time without good cause they shall forfeit
all of their interest in the crop their to me the enjured person—they shall not be allowed
to keep firearms or deadly weapons or ardent Spirits and they shall obey all lawful orders
from me or my Agent and shall be honest—truthful—sober—civel—diligent in their busi-
ness & for all wilful Disobedience of any lawful orders from me or my Agent drunkenness
moral or legal misconduct want of respects or civility to me or my Agent or to my Family
or any else, I am permitted to discharge them forfeiting any claims upon me for any part
of the crop as for this agreement & they are to assist in Sowing all of the Small Grain next
fall & winter and in a settlement with them at the end of the year earch hand is to draw
their portion of their crop fall hands—far three forths hands—half or one forth hands as is
Set down opposite their names as witness our hands & Seals January 1st, 1868

Moses Nathan	1 full hand ⁷
Jake Chappal	“ “ “
Milly Williams	½ “
Easter Williams	“ “
Mack Williams	

Laurens Dist
South Carolina

We the white labores now employed by John. D. Williams on his white plains plantation
have lisened and heard read the foregoing Contract on this Sheet of paper assign equal
for the black laborers employed by him on said place and we are perfectly Satisfied with
it and heare by bind our selves to abide & be Governed & Controwed by it

As witness our hands & seals this January 1st 1868

Wm Wyattte	1 fall hand	Wm. Wyattte
John Wyattte	1 fall hand	John Wyattte
Packingham Wyattte	½ “ “	P Wyattte
Franklin Wyattte	½ “ “	F Wyattte
R M Hughes	1 fall hand	R M Hughes
B G Pollard	1 fall hand	B G Pollard
G W Pollard	1 fall hand	George Washington Pollard

⁷ All of the Negroes and two of the whites made their marks.

To read more about Reconstruction:

The Freedman's Bureau Online

Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1980)

Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (2005)

John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (1961-1994)

Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (2004)

Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (1997)

Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedman's Aid Movement* (2007)

You may also like:

Jacqueline Jones on Civil War Savannah (NEP, January 2011)

Daina Ramey Berry on Slavery, Work, and Sexuality (NEP, October 2011)

Enslaved Life and Labor in the US (NEP October 2011)

Document Sources:

The Contract: Rosser H. Taylor, "Post-Bellum Southern Rental Contracts," Agricultural History 17 (1943):122-3

The Fulton letter: M. C. Fulton to Brig. General Davis Tillson, 17 April, 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Georgia Assistant Commissioner, Record Group 105

(Records of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands), National Archives, Washington, D. C.

Posted February 8, 2012

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